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DEPARTMENT OF RED CROSS NURSING

IN CHARGE OF

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PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE NURSE¹

BY LIVINGSTON FARRAND

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I feel a natural timidity in attempting to speak to a great group of this sort, made up of people who know their own business very much better than I possibly can know it; but I seized the opportunity with a certain eagerness in order, if for no other reason, to be able by simply being here to pay a tribute to the superb work and service which the nursing profession has given during these past years; and also to signalize what I regard as the absolutely critical, important role which the nursing profession is bound to play in the immediate future.

I intend to speak first regarding the general situation in which the world finds itself. That I cannot do to any extent, but I think we all must remember this: that while the armistice brought an end to active hostilities, the war and the results of the war are far from ended. What we see to-day is a world in a state of confusion, in a state of disaster, which those years of the war, even, could not approach. We see a world, and particularly a Europe, that is absolutely shattered from the point of view of vitality. We see a world that is disease ridden, that is riddled with epidemics, that is staggered with the results of those years of war and faced with the problem of rehabilitation in all departments, and without the strength to do it. The effecting and perhaps, in some ways, the compensating fact is this: that as a result we also see a world that has been shocked into a state of at least partial attention to the conditions. Now what does this mean? It means that every civilized country in the world is beginning to attend as it had never attended before to the problem of its health, to the problem of its vitality. And what is true of Europe is true of us Americans to a certain extent, even though we have not suffered in any way comparable to our European allies and former enemies. This means that the world has now, following the war, engaged itself in a veritable crusade against preventable disease in an effort to restore the vitality that has been destroyed by the war. It means further that it is high time that every thinking man and

¹ Address given at the joint Red Cross meeting, Atlanta, Ga., April 15, 1920.

woman in this country, that every citizen, that the nation as a whole takes stock of the present situation, that we consider most deeply and most carefully the means that may be at hand or may be devised to meet the problems presented by the present conditions.

What is the particular problem that is presented and what are the weapons that we can employ to meet the problem that we face?

I often think as we busy ourselves every day with the highly specialized tasks in which the most of us are engaged, that we do not sufficiently concern ourselves with the broader point of view, that we do not try hard enough to see how each one of the specialized agencies fits into the whole situation.

To illustrate by the medical profession—and I can speak with some frankness on that point—the medical profession does not realize the revolution that is going on within its own ranks. It does not as a body as yet perceive that the aim of modern medicine is a totally different thing from that of the medicine of twenty-five and still more of fifty years ago. It does not realize that the problem of medicine to-day is no longer primarily the cure of the sick, but is the prevention of disease. It does not, I think, see clearly that inevitable trend toward what, for lack of a better term, we call state medicine.

What does this mean? It means primarily, that from the experience of the last three decades, we have now realized that the responsibility for the protection of the public health, the responsibility for the protection of preventable disease is a public and official responsibility, and that recognition has very profound significance for the medical profession, and the certainty of the developments has never been more clear than during this last year that has followed the armistice. We are faced to-day in every part of the country, as in every country in Europe, with an absolute shortage of physicians; we are faced with a state of affairs where it is practically impossible, except in the larger centers of population, to procure adequate medical care. It means that there must be a development, there must be a method devised by which through coördination and concentration, the products of medical science can be placed at the disposal of the population, and a very large proportion of the population to-day cannot obtain that service.

In placing the responsibility for the protection of the public health upon the public authorities we have got to realize that that responsibility cannot be accepted and discharged unless the public authorities are backed by an educated and a soundly informed public opinion. We must recognize, as is always the case, particularly in a democracy such as our own, that the first steps and demonstrations in the attack on disease must be made by private initiative and by private organization.

We have seen our public health departments, so called, develop during the last fifty years by short steps, each step forward and usually brought about by some particular dramatic occurrence and emergency, perhaps through an epidemic of cholera that enabled a health department to get more power, to gain more fully the confidence of its community, in other words to take a step forward.

As this was going on we have seen spring up throughout this country individual movements directed against specific forms of preventable diseases, particularly such diseases as tuberculosis, under private auspices. The problems of infantile mortality, of child health and hygiene, and venereal disease have aroused universal interest. In other words, we have seen growing up throughout the United States a lot of scattered movements, each one excellent, each one directed as a rule by the soundest kind of advanced opinion, each one making a demonstration of method, each one pointed ultimately toward the turning over of the responsibilities to the public authorities.

We have now come to the point where as we are urging the assumption of responsibility by the authorities, we must concentrate this private effort, we must coördinate it and be ready to turn it over with an informed public opinion in such a way that the country can meet the situation which now confronts us.

Now why am I bringing that before you? Because it is the nursing profession which is the kernel of the entire situation. If there is one lesson that we have learned in the last thirty years it is that there can be no practical local campaign for the public health, no soundly conducted campaign of preventive medicine in any community, that does not center itself around the nurse, and so, whatever we are trying to do in this campaign for public health and the prevention of disease and the building up of national and international vitality—it all depends upon you. And if the problem, at the moment, is to provide additional nurses to meet the situation that we now face, then it is a duty of every agency interested to do what it can to see that that supply of nurses is produced. If the lack is inadequate provision for the training of nurses, then it is a public responsibility to see to it that the proper educational facilities are obtained and that the proper educational standards are laid down and arrived at. In other words, no success can be obtained without the nurse as the center factor in the practical application to community problems, of what the advance of medical knowledge has taught are the necessary steps to be taken in order to prevent preventable disease.

I am not going to talk about the part the Red Cross is trying to play in this situation. I only want to say this: that when following

the war the problem arose of determining what the general policy of the Red Cross should be in the situation in which this country found itself, whether it should demobilize completely, or hold itself ready to contribute what it could to the solution of our difficulties, when we had to decide whether or not the Red Cross as an organization should deflate to its pre-war basis, there was but one answer that could be given; it was that in the country's crisis, greater after the war than during the war, if the Red Cross could be of service, then the Red Cross was bound to be of service.

When we looked over the field, when we saw the economic and the social and the vital problems that were presented, it was perfectly obvious that the field in which the Red Cross could be of most service was in that of health and vitality. The problem which then presented itself was so to direct its effort that it should not confuse the situation, that is, should not hinder the operation or the activities of existing organizations, but should help them. In the field of public health nursing, the path of the Red Cross was reasonably clear, but there remained the general public and the part which it could play as represented by the general membership of the Red Cross in building up the health and vitality of the American people. There, as in most other instances of the sort, is a problem of the education of the public and the Red Cross organization proposes that it shall play its role in bringing the necessary education to the public in so far as it may be able; and in working out the plans, we are concentrating attention upon the community problem, no longer to be solved by methods and directions issued in military manner from headquarters at Washington, but by throwing the responsibility upon the community to determine how in each community that situation can be best met.

We have come to the conclusion that the greatest thing in the average American community to-day is the concentration of health effort in what may be known, for lack of a better term, as some sort of a health center. When we talk about a health center we mean an institution that may vary just as widely as there are communities in the United States. I am not going to outline that to-night, but I am going to repeat that there cannot be a successful health center that does not ultimately attach to it and does not base itself on the work of the nurse. And I come back to the point from which I started, that the Red Cross in its work for the upbuilding of American vitality, that every organization which is charged with the responsibility of guarding public health, all these groups come back in the last instance and base their work upon your profession.